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The Family Trap in The Return of the Native

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THE FAMILY TRAP IN
THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

By ANNE Z. MICKELSON

"All are caged birds," wrote Thomas Hardy, "the only difference is in the size of the cage."¹ The remark helps to explain why we are beginning to link Hardy's vision of the world to Writers of the Absurd, like Beckett, but with a difference. In Beckett's solitary world, man is as insignificant as in Hardy's. Characters wait for a Godot who never comes, or pass their time in an urn, or are up to the neck in sand. But where Beckett's people have come to accept this as a natural state of affairs in a universe which makes no sense, Hardy's men and women still struggle. Desperately, stoically they attempt to break through a maze of traps — family, sexual, marital, and societal — one very often leading into the other like in those Chinese puzzle boxes of varying size, only to find that there is no exit.

Each of his four great novels — The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and Jude the Obscure — dramatize in increasing intensity this struggle and failure. Mrs. Yeobright and Clym (The Return of the Native) and Tess (Tess of the d'Urbervilles) find themselves in the family trap — victims of their intense family feeling. In addition, Tess and Clym encounter the trap of sex. Eustacia Vye (The Return of the Native) seething with sexuality and confused desires of all kinds blunders first into the Yeobright family trap and then into her own marriage trap. Even when people like Michael Henchard (The Mayor of Casterbridge) break out, they find freedom is illusory and that the trap is still

¹ Florence Emily Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928 (New York, 1962), 171. Hereafter referred to as Life. This work published under the name of Hardy's second wife is largely, according to Carl J. Weber, Hardy's own work.
there and has been set all the time just waiting to be sprung.

Hardy's last hero and heroine, Jude and Sue (*Jude the Obscure*) become the embodiment of imprisoned people as one trap after another closes about them until death is longed for as the only release. Since family plays such an important role in most of Hardy's novels, even when it is a shadowy presence of the past as in *Jude*, I will confine myself to a discussion of "the family trap" as dramatized in *The Return of the Native*. This novel written in 1878 and considered by D. H. Lawrence as Hardy's "first tragic and important novel"\(^2\) demonstrates Hardy's thinking, later developed by Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers*, that man is threatened with emasculation by possessive mother love.

Clym and his mother, the fierce Mrs. Yeobright, are dramatic presentations of the dilemma of people who want a better life than the one they see about them, while at the same time cherishing different concepts of how to implement this new life. Despite what has been frequently commented on as Hardy's classical and Biblical illusions, family in this novel and elsewhere is ordinary humanity often confused and often suffering. *Mother and son in The Return of the Native* are presented with sympathy and understanding, but without minimizing their limitations. Mrs. Yeobright is seen as a woman with little education and experience. For Hardy this is no drawback. Unlike Hemingway, who often voices contempt for women and for what he considers their ignorance of the "real world" (as in "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife") Hardy is convinced that woman's intuition makes up for any lack of experience. Mrs. Yeobright belongs to those women, he comments, whose gift of intuition enables them to transcend the narrow environs of their life and envision "a world which they never saw, and estimate forces of which they have only heard."\(^3\)

As it turns out, Mrs. Yeobright's intuition seems to be a sharpened awareness of the desolation and mindless activity of Egdon Heath, its effect on a sensitive and intelligent person like her son Clym, and an endorsement of the world outside her doors, with its competitiveness and striving for material success. She becomes convinced that it is her duty and responsibility to

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\(^3\) Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (New York: Harper & Row, N.D.), 223. All quotes will be from this source.
“lift” her son out of Egdon Heath “into something richer” (p. 210). This she accomplishes with the help of a kind stranger who sees to it that Clym is educated and later gets his chance to go to Paris for a diamond establishment. In this acceptance of the Protestant ethic which gives holy sanction to progress, self-improvement, and accumulation of wealth, Mrs. Yeobright is very much a product of her age. Her aspirations for her son Clym foreshadow those of Lawrence’s Mrs. Morel with Paul. Both sons, in turn, illustrate a hatred and rejection of a world endorsed by their mothers.

Hardy does not pass judgment on her. The role of the narrator here is a kind of third voice attempting to understand the actions and motives of his characters. Whether he is a fictive persona in his own right changing from book to book as Daniel R. Schwartz so persuasively argues is interesting but debatable. Hardy himself seems to have held the view of Lawrence that a writer sloughs off bits of himself in his books which reflect certain stages in his development. “A writer who is not a mere imitator,” he wrote, “looks upon the world with his personal eyes, and in his peculiar moods . . .”5 In the absence of a biography which would give insight into Hardy as Richard Ellmann does with Joyce or Harry T. Moore with D. H. Lawrence, it is feasible to take Hardy at his own word and regard the novels as attempts to understand and interpret experience not always fully understood by him. In this way, the novels become like Anais Nin’s four diaries, a record of personal groping toward some understanding. The Return of the Native, then, may mirror “the peculiar moods” surrounding Hardy’s relationship with his own mother. It is known that none of his family attended his marriage to Emma Lavinia Gifford. Also, Jemima Hardy, his mother, who had known great poverty as a child may have had misgivings about her son’s choice of occupation as a writer and voiced them to him.

This is not to be interpreted as stating that Hardy’s relationship with his mother was bad. He seems to have been devoted to her and this may have influenced his sympathetic portrait of Mrs. Yeobright, without minimizing the materialism of her

5 Harold Oreil, ed. Thomas Hardy’s Personal Writings: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences (Lawrence, Kansas, 1966), 122.
aspirations. Pointing out that age and poverty had robbed Mrs. Yeobright of "her once elastic walk" and "pride of life" (p. 224), he implies that those who have known penury have a right to emphasize economic security. As so often happens in his books, the comment is not a bit of "adhesive tape" as Dorothy Van Ghent says of Hardy's philosophical comments in her complaint of his style. On the contrary, it has the effect of throwing into dramatic relief the mother's past efforts at self-fulfillment and what it has done to her personality. That remark of hers to Clym: "I suppose you will be like your father; like him, you are getting weary of doing well" (p. 208) demonstrates that having failed with her husband, she has concentrated all of her energies on her son.

The Return of the Native covers events between 1840-1850. W. J. Reader writes that there was little opportunity for a man of the lower class to better himself and rise above the rank of laborer. By enabling Clym to have an education and affording him the opportunity to do something other than field work, Mrs. Yeobright is reasonable to a point in expecting her son to advance himself. From another standpoint, however, since the Victorian woman's opportunity for self-fulfillment was largely limited to the family, it is obvious that this is how Mrs. Yeobright expects some kind of happiness for herself.

The focus of Hardy's consciousness, then, on Mrs. Yeobright leaves us with the impression that she is one of those strong women denied self-fulfillment by society and forced to seek it through the men in her family. Left husbandless and poor, she throws all of her energies into her son (like Lawrence's Mrs. Morel) enlisting every possible aid to have her son escape primitive Egdon Heath. Not above deceit and manipulation (as noted in that calm lie to Wildeve that Thomasin has another eligible suitor), it is probable that more than chance enables her to obtain a free education for Clym and a job in a business which offers chance for advancement. She continues to exercise a protective role over her son from a distance by keeping from him matters she considers distracting, for example, Thomasin's failure to marry Wildeve the first time.

The novel's involvement with Mrs. Yeobright, however, and

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the special note of pleading for her which sometimes enters into the story does not minimize what Mrs. Yeobright considers distracting. It is love and women. This she demonstrates first with Thomasin, then with Eustacia. Hardy soon dramatizes that when possessiveness is an active ingredient of mother love, it turns into destructiveness. Mrs. Yeobright may euphemize to herself that she is only concerned about Clym being “tender-hearted” (p. 214) and where this is going to lead him to with Eustacia, but, in reality, the reader understands that it is jealousy which sways her.

Human happiness is always evanescent in Hardy’s world and it is even more likely to disappear when based on another human being. Mrs. Yeobright’s relationship with her son begins to suffer when jealousy of Eustacia forces her to bitter and rash statements. Her heated rhetoric to her son indicates not only her possessiveness, but how much he represents for her a window on the outside world. The jealous resolve not to be robbed of her son and her self-fulfillment through him quickly crystallizes into shrewd recognition of Eustacia’s formidable rivalry. Marshalling the heavy equipment of possessive love (how can you see anything in a heath girl after the women of Paris), the scene between mother and son quickly proves that Eustacia is not the real issue. No woman is or could be acceptable at the present time to Mrs. Yeobright. Her remark: “why do you wish to connect yourself with anybody at the present” (p. 227) fired off at the climax of the scene is evidence of this. Anger at being supplanted in her son’s affections, as she sees it, makes her blunder on. Eustacia is a “hussy” (p. 228), Clym is “blinded” (p. 227) (in this she is right), and the scene ends with Clym warning her to stop or he will be tempted to say things both will regret.

Hardy’s handling of Mrs. Yeobright ultimately defines not so much the possessiveness of the relationship with her son as much as the disparate elements which compound her feelings for him. Prior to everything else is her real concern for his happiness. Ignorance of how closely this happiness is linked to her own aspirations for self-fulfillment is one of the reasons she often appeals to our sympathies. There are moments when her intuition operates to make her sense that her over-maternalism adds to her son’s confused state of mind and how he, in
turn, reacts by demanding various roles of her: give him counsel, allow him to pursue his own ideas, stand firm when he wants to change his mind, etc. Intensity of feeling for her son makes her act out these various roles and their growing proliferation bewilders her. Germane to the novel's materials is this round-robin of action in which responding to her son's muddle of needs, she only increases his own bewilderment, frustration, and desire for rebellion which eventually takes the form of a headlong rush into an impulsive marriage with Eustacia.

In the end, she demonstrates a kind of Hardean romanticized view of real motherhood in which the elements of mother love form no procrustean bed into which they can be fitted. Swallowing her pride and resentment of Eustacia and conscious of only a desire to effect a reconciliation with Clym and his bride, she makes that long trek to his home only to die on the road a victim not only of the intense heat, but of her own consuming love. In giving her a poetic death complete with a pillow of fragrant thyme and a vision of a silver heron silhouetted against a sky, Hardy with his comments about mothers and their responsibilities seems to want to give the impression that if mothers sin, this sin can only be likened to Mary Magdelene's — loving too much.

The hermetic style of the scene with Eustacia attempts to bring this out: "No," says Mrs. Yeobright in answer to Eustacia's accusation that she is against her, "I was simply for Clym. It is the instinct of everyone to look after their own" (p. 287). The effect of the language on the reader, however, is not an impression of the difficulties of being a wise and good parent, but to produce an image of a lioness guarding her cub. Hardy's difficulties with Mrs. Yeobright and Clym resemble those of D. H. Lawrence with Gertrude Morel and Paul — attempts to portray an experience not completely understood. On the other hand, aware of the deep divisions in Clym's personality resulting from the intense relationship between mother and son, and trying to understand the causes of the ultimate failure of Clym's marriage, Hardy seems to be groping toward the explanation which Lawrence gives after the publication of *Sons and Lovers* expressed in *Psychoanalysis* . . .:

“If you want to see the real desirable wife-spirit, look at a mother
with her boy of eighteen. How she serves him, how she stimulates him, how her true female self is his, is wife-submissive to him as never, never it could be to a husband. This is the quiescent, flowering love of a mature woman . . . . asking nothing, asking nothing of the beloved, save that he shall be himself, and that for his living he shall accept the gift of her love . . . . The woman now feels for the first time as a true wife might feel. And her feeling is towards her son.” The child comes to feel that this is an “ideal love already, the best he will ever know” and he forever searches for an equivalent without success. Lawrence adds: “No wonder they say geniuses mostly have great mothers. They mostly have sad fates.”

Clym is far from being a genius, but he has certain potentials which never flower. Hardy speaks of him as “a lad of whom something was expected.” What form this would take, he comments, no one knew. “The only absolute certainty about him was that he would not stand still in the circumstances amid which he was born” (p. 198). Clym does go away, but he is soon drawn back to his mother and the heath. A loner, he discovers that he has as little in common with the people of Paris as he formerly believed he had with the rustics of Egdon Heath (p. 201). Back on the heath and bolstered by his mother’s understanding that the life in Paris of catering to roués and their mistresses is sordid (demonstrating, perhaps, not only sympathy on the part of Mrs. Yeobright but relief that her baby is back under the maternal wing), he decides that he wants plain living.

Hardy, though a lover of the pastoral life, is as aware of its limitations as was that hater of the pastoral, Samuel Johnson. “Yeobright’s local peculiarity,” he comments, is that he wanted not only “plain living” but “wild and meagre living in many respects, and brotherliness with clowns” (p. 203). Ironically, the clowns don’t want any part of Clym’s efforts to lift them out of their darkness of superstition and general ignorance. Nor does it seem that Clym is convinced of his vocation to bring light where he sees darkness. Deflated by their lack of enthusiasm for his idealistic cry of: “I’ve come home because, all things considered, I can be a trifle less useless here than anywhere else” (p. 201), he quickly turns to a woman. With Eustacia, he hopes that the sexual stirrings he feels within him will lead to union with a woman who will in some way allay

8 D. H. Lawrence, Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious, Fantasia of the Unconscious (New York, 1921), 158-159.
his fears of the void within him and enable him to lead a happy and useful life. His choice of Eustacia, a passionate and frustrated woman, is as indicative of his self-delusiveness as is his aim to educate the natives of Egdon Heath. Eustacia can no more fit his role for her — self-dedication to mind and work — than he can go back to the diamond business.

With Clym, Hardy anticipates the plurality of choices before modern man which he saw as one of the “aches of modernism.” He strives to show Clym beset by the dilemma of formulating his own values: “Mother, what is doing well,” Clym asks his mother drearily in response to her praise of the virtue of hard work and success. “I am weary of what you mean by it” (p. 208). As Hardy sees it, here encapsulated are the ingredients of the modern struggle to come to terms with the idea of progress: work which involves the struggle for material commodities, or work which is meaningful in terms of spiritual satisfaction. Hardy is in agreement with Clym that a man should attempt more than the amassing of wealth. He’s contemptuous of those who only think of themselves and “die comfortably in their beds” (p. 205). He praises Clym for not settling for “happiness and mediocrity” (p. 204) and being “ridiculous” enough in the eyes of the world to “throw up his business to benefit his fellow creatures” (p. 205). He’s thoroughly on Clym’s side in his resolve to cut himself away from a job even though it pays well to get into something more meaningful to himself and to society. Thus the scene between mother and son has the effect of projecting the age-old argument between the generations: parents who never having enjoyed economic security, wanting it for their children and children yearning for something more than acquisitiveness. Hardy is the third voice here adding his comments to the controversy seeing first one viewpoint, then the other.

There is some justification for critical comment⁹ that the author eventually appears dissatisfied with his hero for his vacillations and final apathy. But what fails to be taken into account is that vital to the novel’s meaning is what Albert Guerard so astutely assesses as Hardy’s affinity with novelists writing in the twentieth-century — writers who attempt to com-

⁹ Michael Millgate, Thomas Hardy (New York, 1971). 130-144.
prehend the century's "deliberate fragmentations." Guerard points out that this is done with a series of heroes who mirror this fragmentation and he specifically links Hardy to Conrad and Gide. Hardy's hero, Clym, in my opinion, however, is closer to Camus's Merseault in his apathy and withdrawal. Like Merseault, Clym tries the big city, has hopes and aspirations, then decides nothing much is worthwhile except a kind of mindless work which creates no strain. It is interesting that both writers begin and end their books with the mother-son relationship indicating, perhaps, that Hardy and the existentialist Camus detect in a certain mother-son relationship one of the clues to the feeling of dissatisfaction with modern life. Merseault keeps being drawn back to thoughts of his mother and in the end it is the mother who dominates his thinking: "With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again."

Clym, away from his mother's adulation of him, seems to experience a sense of his insignificance in the universe. Hardy frequently places his characters on the top of a hill and lets the stately progress of the heavens fill them with a sense of their own unimportance as that scene with Gabriel Oak in *Far From the Madding Crowd* indicates. But where Gabriel accepts this philosophically, Clym like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim (*Slaughter House Five*) has a space experience which leaves him thinking everything is meaningless. We read of Clym looking at the moon. His eyes "traveled over the length and breadth of that distant country — over the Bay of Rainbows, the sombre Sea of Crises, the Ocean of Storms, the Lake of Dreams, the vast Walled Plains, and the wondrous Ring Mountains — till he almost felt himself to be voyaging bodily through its wild scenes" (p. 230). Clym comes back to himself, sighs, and shakes himself. It is at this time that the eclipse of the moon begins and Eustacia appears.

The sexual relationship between Clym and Eustacia affords Hardy the opportunity to explore psychological processes of guilt, fear, and self-discovery, and it is soon obvious that Clym's fears eclipse him as active man. The disintegrating process

begins with Clym as lover and husband demonstrating, as has already been stated, what Freud and Lawrence believed to be the damaging effect of possessive mother love on the sexual life. We don't know if Hardy had read Freud, but he scatters enough hints throughout the book to lend credence to the idea that he himself might have been thinking along Freudian lines. There is Clym's post-proposal depression after Eustacia accepts him. He wonders how his mother is going to take this new turn of events, wishes he had never met Eustacia, retracts the thought as disloyal, then speculates how he can be teacher, son, lover, and fulfiller of dreams — his own, his mother's, and Eustacia's. After their marriage, the news that Eustacia has quarreled with his mother and his hearing of her decision: "I have seen your mother; and I will never see her again" (p. 291) has the effect of "a weight... like a stone" upon him. It is not surprising to read that not long thereafter, he deserts the connubial bed to read far into the night until his eyes become inflamed and he is in danger of losing his eyesight. His decision to become a furze cutter is practical in view of finances, but the choice of occupation has overtones of unconscious revenge against both women since the two consider the work demeaning. Eustacia cannot contain her bitterness when she comes upon him humming as he works in the field, and a later scene with the mother looking down at her son's cottage conveys her despair at his low status in life. Here the blackened trees and shrubbery blasted by lightning and other elements provides an objective correlative of the mother's inner state.

Hardy's images often evoke and fuse outer and inner states of reality. One of the striking elements in the book is the way he conveys Clym's failure as husband and lover through contrasting images of barrenness and lushness. Outside Clym's house, wasps roll drunkenly among the fallen and juicy apples, sap simmers in the hollyhocks, and flowers half close their leaves in the heat (p. 330). Inside, Clym sleeps in a deep stupor of fatigue beside an unlit fire while Eustacia and Wildeve are shown as rekindling some of their former passion for each other. That unlit fire suggests Clym's low sexuality almost in the same way as George Eliot suggests Casaubon's lack of virility by naming his home "Lowick" and telling us that in this home, dim tapers burn. Other similarities between Eliot and
Hardy present themselves. Like Casaubon, Clym marries a young and beautiful woman whom he apparently feels unable to satisfy. Casaubon’s failure seems to be due primarily to mental shrinking from participation in life which, in turn, reflects itself in physical sickliness. Clym, a younger man, seems to have the same problem. In addition, there is a Hamlet-like attachment to his mother. It is perhaps no coincidence that the confrontation between him and Eustacia after his mother’s death has a strong flavor of the closet scene in *Hamlet* as Clym holds out an envelope crying to Eustacia: “Can you read, madame? Look at this envelope” (p. 389).

There are times in the book when Hardy, like Lawrence (*Sons and Lovers*, etc.) seems to be deliberating about what a close mother-son relationship does to a man’s masculinity. Clym frequently uses the word “deserve” in connection with himself as if he believes that a man must give pragmatic evidence of his masculinity. His fears, after the deaths of Eustacia and Wildeve, that Thomasin may now be thinking romantically of him and his conviction that any love he could offer her would be “small and sickly” (p. 460) has hints of sexual fears. At the end, when Thomasin tells him of her wish to marry Venn, he gives his consent with the words: “My sex owes you every amends for the treatment you received in days gone by” (p. 473). Of course, he is referring to Wildeve’s neglect of Thomasin, yet, a curious impression persists that Clym is implying that he is not capable, or has ever been capable of sexual love with a woman. His warning to Thomasin that he is not a man for marriage may be the memory of Eustacia’s bitter words: “You are no blessing, my husband” (p. 388).

Throughout the book, there are verbal thrusts that the young generation is somehow lacking in virility. The idea that the young men are weaker and less virile than their fathers becomes both a point of humor for Hardy with his treatment of Christian Cantle and the basis for serious philosophical thought on the dangers of abstract thought with Clym. There is never any doubt in our mind that Christian Cantle, sexless and puny, is a victim of heredity, superstition, and an inverted family relationship in which the son is the restraining parent and the parent an unruly son. At the same time, we are aware of Hardy’s preference for Grandfer Cantle when he has him stoutly
affirm that witch or not he would marry Eustacia despite his seventy-odd years; or when he has him crow “I’m as light as a kite when anything’s going on” (pp. 163-164). Christian, on the other hand, is presented as a man riddled with fears. Hardy has a lot of fun with Christian and his father showing that the old man is ready for anything while Christian is afraid of everything: women, the dark, death, and even dance as “tempting the Wicked one” (p. 33).

If there is humor about Christian and his father, there is none about Clym. The theme of his masculinity and virility rumbles throughout the book from beginning to end making us wonder about the cryptic notation in Hardy’s Life about Jane, their servant having a baby but no sign of a child for the Hardys.12 The extent to which the virility theme issues from the grain and substance of the novel is evidenced in the first quarter of the book when Hardy gives an anatomical description of Clym’s face as well-shaped but already beginning to be preyed upon by “parasite thought” (p. 161). Such phrases as “disease of flesh” (p. 162) and the conviction that physical beauty deteriorates with over-emphasis on intellect and neglect of body, bear out Hardy’s conviction that Clym, modern man, stresses abstract thought and, hence, suffers physical and emotional decline. That later emphasis by Lawrence in novel after novel that flesh and spirit must be nourished in equal proportions is foreshadowed in Hardy’s: “Mental luminousness must be fed with the oil of life” (p. 162).

There is also evidence in the characterization of Clym of the influence of Samuel Johnson, whose Rasselas Hardy greatly admired. By turning from one thing to another, always searching for some one way of life, Clym illustrates Imlac’s warning to the prince Rasselas: “while you are making the choice of life, you neglect to live.”13 Clym never does get to the business of living. In the end, he appears a shadow of a man who at thirty-three is worn out by his mental struggles and emotional problems with the two women in his life. Both are dead by this time, but the mother’s presence is still palpable. Relieved that Thomasin does not wish to marry him, withdrawn from active

12 Life, 116. Hardy writes: “We hear that Jane, our late servant, is soon to have a baby. Yet never a sign of one is there for us.”
life, Clym appears more comfortable worshipping women than living with them. That portrait of his sitting and contemplating his mother’s chair, or fingering a lock of Eustacia’s hair, shows a man more content with symbols than longing for tangibles. Alone in his dark house through which the sounds of life can only filter through, or on the Barrow at a distance from the people to whom he preaches, he is like so many of Joyce’s Dubliners a study in stasis. In his resolve to preach only on “morally unimpeachable subjects” (p. 485) which will involve him in no controversy, he is a man whose body may move from place to place, but whose soul remains stationary. Unlike Lawrence’s Paul Morel who chooses life in the end, or even Gerald Crich who elects death, Clym is life-in-death — a tragic example to Hardy of the family trap.

INVENTION AND TRADITION:
ALLUSIONS IN DESPERATE REMEDIES
By Marlene Springer

When writing retrospectively of his first published novel, Thomas Hardy described Desperate Remedies (1871) as a work wherein “he was feeling his way to a method.” It is now well-known that the book was the result of George Meredith’s admonition to “write a story with a plot,” and critics in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century agree that Hardy was eminently successful in following Meredith’s advice. Beyond this consensus, however, critical opinion is characteristically varied: Hardy himself admitted that “the principles observed in its composition are, no doubt, too exclusively those in which mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral obliquity are depended on for exciting interest”; Irving Howe in his Thomas Hardy (1967) deems the novel “one of the most interesting bad novels in the English language”; F. R. Southerington in Hardy’s Vision of Man (1971) calls it a strange book, admits that it deserves attention, but assigns its merits to its foreshadowing of themes in the later works.

Given the vantage point of a century, one has little doubt